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ABSTRACT

This digest suggests that bibliotherapy is a potentially powerful method for school teachers and counselors to use on many levels and in every school grade. It begins with a brief review of the history of bibliotherapy; continues with a discussion of some approaches to bibliotherapy (interactive, clinical, and developmental); then addresses the four basic stages of bibliotherapy (identification, selection, presentation, and follow-up); and also discusses benefits and limitations of bibliotherapy. (Contains 11 references.) (RS)

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by Mardziah Hayati Abdullah

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Bibliotherapy

by *Marziah Hayati Abdullah*

What is bibliotherapy?

Bibliotherapy generally refers to the use of literature to help people cope with emotional problems, mental illness, or changes in their lives (Pardeck, 1994), or to produce affective change and promote personality growth and development (Lenkowsky, 1987; Adderholdt-Elliott & Eller, 1989). By providing literature relevant to their personal situations and developmental needs at appropriate times (Hebert & Kent, 2000), bibliotherapy practitioners attempt to help people of all ages to understand themselves and to cope with problems such as separation and divorce, child abuse, foster care, and adoption. This Digest will briefly review the history of bibliotherapy, summarize some approaches to its application, outline the basic stages of the bibliotherapeutic process, and will conclude by reviewing the benefits and limitations which have been observed in its application.

Historically, bibliotherapy dates back to the 1930s when librarians began compiling lists of written material that helped individuals modify their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors for therapeutic purposes. Counselors worked in conjunction with librarians to 'prescribe' selected literature for clients experiencing problems (Pardeck, 1994).

The underlying premise of bibliotherapy is that clients identify with literary characters similar to themselves, an association that helps the clients release emotions, gain new directions in life, and explore new ways of interacting (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). Teenage readers, for example, may feel relief that they are not the only ones facing a specific problem. They learn vicariously how to solve their problems by reflecting on how the characters in the book solve theirs (Hebert & Kent, 2000).

Some approaches in bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy practice has varied in approach and focus since it was first used in the 1930s. Traditional bibliotherapy, for example, tended to be more 'reactive' in its approach in that the process focused on getting individuals to react positively or negatively to the reading material. More recent approaches, however, assume that the therapeutic process is actually a more *interactive* one: the reader becomes part of the unfolding intellectual and emotional process of the story, and in struggling to understand what is being communicated at the deepest levels, the reader responds by making a positive alternation or modification in behavior or attitude (Myers, 1998). In *interactive bibliotherapy*, participants engage in activities that help them reflect on what they read, such as group discussion and dialogue journal writing (Palmer, et al., 1997; Anderson & MacCurdy, 2000; Morawski & Gilbert, 2000).

In *clinical bibliotherapy* and *bibliocounseling*, skilled practitioners use therapeutic methods to help individuals experiencing serious emotional problems. Classroom teachers are more likely to use *developmental bibliotherapy*, which involves helping students in their normal health and development. The advantage of the latter approach is that teachers can identify the concerns of their students and address the issues before problems arise. Students can also be guided through predictable stages of adolescence with knowledge of what to expect and examples of how other teenagers have dealt with the same concerns (Hebert & Kent, 2000).

Whichever approach it involves, bibliotherapy requires careful planning. It seeks to help clients respond directly to the materials they are given, so that change is effected through catharsis (a cleansing of the emotions, primarily through art), insight, or the "copying of character behaviors" (Gladding & Gladding, 1991).

Basic stages in bibliotherapy

Generally, activities in bibliotherapy are designed to:

- provide information
- provide insight
- stimulate discussion about problems
- communicate new values and attitudes
- create awareness that other people have similar problems
- provide realistic solutions to problems

The process goes through four basic stages (Pardeck, 1993): *identification, selection, presentation, and follow-up.*

During the first two stages, the clients' needs must be identified, and appropriate books selected to match their particular problems. The selection process takes skill and insight, as the books must provide correct information about a problem while not imparting a false sense of hope. The books must then be presented carefully and strategically so that the clients are able to see similarities between themselves and the book characters. Once the clients can identify with the main character, they enter the follow-up stage during which they share what they have gained. They express catharsis verbally in discussion or writing, or nonverbal means such as art (Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000), role-playing, creative problem solving, or self-selected options for students to pursue individually (Hebert & Kent, 2000). Once catharsis has occurred, the clients can be guided to gain insight into the problem.

The success of the bibliotherapy program depends largely on how well teachers or counselors play their vital role as facilitator throughout the whole process. Sridhar & Vaughn (2000) provide useful ideas on how teachers can get ready for the process, and what they can do before, during and after reading.

Benefits and limitations of bibliotherapy

In addition to the "how" of conducting bibliotherapy, practitioners also need to be aware of potential benefits and pitfalls associated with this procedure. Bibliotherapy has obvious value in that it provides the opportunity for the participants to recognize and understand themselves, their characteristics, and the complexity of human thought and behavior. It may also promote social development as well as the love of literature in general, and reading in particular (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). It reduces feelings of isolation that may be felt by people with problems.

The effectiveness of bibliotherapy, however, may be limited by the availability of materials on certain topics, as well as the lack of client readiness and willingness to read. Clients may also project their own motives onto characters and thus reinforce their own perceptions and solutions. In addition, participants may be defensive, thus discounting the actions of characters and failing to identify with them, or even end up using them as scapegoats. Some of these limitations can be overcome through the continuation of the process itself, role playing, and the use of group discussions (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). Facilitator limitations are also a challenge: facilitators may have limited knowledge of human development and developmental problems, and inadequate knowledge about appropriate literature. Facilitators thus need to be properly trained and exposed to a repertoire of literature suitable for use in bibliotherapy. One other limitation may lie in the bibliotherapy process itself: for example, clients may be unwilling to discuss areas that are uncomfortable, or facilitators may insist on making a point at the client's expense. The process is also limited if both the client and counselor stay on surface issues. These limitations can be addressed by suspending sessions until both parties are ready and willing to work, by taping and critiquing selected sessions so that facilitators can monitor their own reactions to certain clients or problem areas, and by revisiting issues in stories that have been treated superficially in previous sessions (Gladding & Gladding, 1991).

Conclusion

Bibliotherapy is a potentially powerful method for school teachers and counselors to use on many levels and in every school grade. In order to establish a strong bibliotherapy program in an institution, practitioners must present the procedure as a non-threatening one, starting by calling the process *biblioguidance*, for instance. They must also solicit the input and advice of colleagues, parents, and administrators. In addition, they must always be alert to the limitations of bibliotherapy.

For More Information

Bibliographies from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication are available at: http://eric.indiana.edu/ieo/balpha.html.

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